

The uncomfortable truths about populism



*Populist politicians are often accused of spreading misinformation, but does this tell the full story? **Francesco Duina** writes that while there is no question many populists stretch the truth, they also owe their success to their willingness to accurately describe the way millions of people actually feel and act. Anyone interested in opposing populist politicians must be prepared to deal directly with the uncomfortable truths that they voice.*

Reflecting on Trump's recent press conferences on Covid-19, it seems appropriate to clarify the often-misunderstood relationship between populist leaders and truth. The mainstream media, academics, and others like to dismiss populist leaders as benders of facts and outright liars. They are depicted as champions of 'post-truth' politics, whereby their assertions gain validity not because they are grounded in objective evidence but because they are made with varying combinations of conviction, cynicism, and ego.

Hence, Trump invents things about the curves of pandemics, the effectiveness of Clorox and certain medicines, and the recovery rate of the economy. He is of course not alone. Boris Johnson, well known for his Brexit fantasies, clung early on to impossible hopes about Covid-19. Putin – who has repeatedly denied any Russian involvement in foreign elections or the existence of systematic government doping programmes for Russian athletes – also effectively dismissed the pandemic until now, when infection rates can no longer be hidden. Bolsonaro in Brazil, known already for wild claims about anything from the Brazilian rainforest to the mental wellbeing of gays, is behaving as if Covid-19 simply does not matter.

There is no disputing that populist leaders outright lie. But what if wholesale depictions of them as only liars are inaccurate and risk missing something important? What if many populist leaders owe their successes in part to telling the truth about some things? We should take this possibility seriously. Millions of followers, after all, believe in their veracity. Moreover, even if uncomfortable to hear, it might be beneficial for everyone to identify and reflect on what those truths might be.

Let us consider, first, the less controversial claims. Sociologists and political scientists agree that populism is above all a political style or strategy rather than an ideology. It consists in accusing elites of corruption while praising the moral virtues of the people. The former steal, lie, and cheat. The latter are honest, hardworking, and committed to their country. Herein, then, is the first sort of truth: elites are indeed, on the whole, distant and quite corrupt. This may sound offensive to many (especially those belonging to the elites!), but it is really rather obvious. Who can honestly argue against the claim that the political establishment in many countries has proven itself, over and over, to be dishonest, self-serving, and aligned primarily with special interests?



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More importantly, however, populist leaders may be truthful about something rather different – something that so far most of us have been unwilling to acknowledge. These are the truths about the way millions of people actually feel and act. It might be difficult to hear it. Many of us would prefer to live in a world where things are different. But our biases should not blind us to the facts. We are, after all, committed to objectivity, right? So, what are those truths?

Here are some. Millions of people do not like immigrants. Many of these people are racists, and are fine with that. Millions of people do not care about political correctness. Many would rather spend money on domestic necessities – especially in times of crisis – than on foreign aid. Countless Europeans, Americans, and Indians do not trust and resent China. They also believe that Islam is an inferior religion and civilisation. Millions appreciate having lower electricity bills and prefer plastic straws to paper ones, even if these require expanding drilling operations in pristine environments. They also view their nation as superior and admire countries that stand up for their own interests. And much more.

If any of the above is correct, then populist leaders are truth-tellers in so far as they are expressing things that ring true to millions of people – people who might also happen to be our neighbours, family members, work colleagues, and even friends. Populists are their honest mouthpieces. They articulate their mindsets, fears, and hopes unfiltered and unvarnished. They offer their supporters recognition, validation, and hope. No longer are ‘the people’ ignored and run-over by the self-serving ideologies and utopias of the elites. Here, at last, are leaders who ‘tell it like it is’. The repression is over and they – the people – are finally being heard. What could be more powerful and rewarding?

Populist leaders are telling some truths. If we dismissed them as wholesale liars we would risk misunderstanding why they succeed. If we are interested in stopping them, we must ourselves be honest and deal directly with the truths that they voice. This will take enormous effort and skill. Politics must be cleaned up. Racism and xenophobia must be eradicated. Social security systems must be expanded to provide average citizens with a sense of security. Workers displaced by the global economy must have access to retraining programmes. The list is long and success will not come easy. But the cost of failure is obviously much bigger, and the first step is indeed to look at the truth.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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